

THE CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF BATTERSEA POWER STATION



Richard Stilgoe's 70th birthday voyage.

1. THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA
In which Ruby II and her crew prepare for an adventure.
2. ALL IN THE SAME BOAT.
They set sail, and arrive in London Town.
3. WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE.
From London to Bristol – 166 miles, 125 locks, up 452 feet and down again.
4. NO PORT LEFT.
The Avon gorge, Bristol Channel, Land's End and home.

Part One: **THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA.**



I know seventy is not much of an age nowadays. But when it actually happens to you, it's still a bit of a facer. I have seventy-year old friends who have tried to deny the advancing years by unconvincingly dyeing their hair, buying a sports car (the friend's wife calls his new car the 'Menoporsche') and even marrying younger wives and siring children. I didn't want to do any of that – and my wife Annabel was in full agreement. Instead I was, for the first time in my life, going to take my boat on a proper voyage. Annabel was not necessarily in full agreement with this, but she admitted it was better than the other options.

My boat Ruby II is a Roxane, a retro lugger designed by Nigel Irens as relaxation from his usual forty-knot multihulls. She lives up a muddy creek opposite Salcombe, and like most old ladies she doesn't go out often enough. The plan was to take her out of Salcombe, turn left, up the English channel, turn left again, up the Thames to Reading, through the Kennet and Avon Canal to Bath and Bristol, down the Bristol Channel, round Land's End and back to Salcombe. A circumnavigation South of Watford – or, in Nigel Irens' words, a circumnavigation of Battersea Power Station.



is.

The journey - everything's a journey now – would involve sophisticated navigation, so I carefully mapped out the route on my 1997 Happy Eater map. Ruby doesn't have much of a galley, so this could have other uses if we get peckish.

I had planned the route more than fifty years ago, when I was at school near Bath, by the River Avon under the Dundas Aqueduct, which carried the Kennet and Avon canal sixty feet above the river.



The canal, when it gets to Bath, descends those sixty feet via a series of locks, until it reaches the same level as the River Avon. From there you could get to Bristol, and from Bristol you could get to the sea. If you went the other way – East towards London – you got as far as Devizes, and then came to the defunct Caen Hill flight. John Rennie and his undaunted Georgian engineers, as well as flying the canal across the River Avon sixty feet up in the air, had built a staircase of sixteen locks, lifting the waterway another hundred and thirty one feet so it could cross Wiltshire and Berkshire to join the Thames at Reading, and then descend again to the sea. By 1960 the Devizes flight and the canal were dried up monuments to the zeal of the industrial revolution, and the thought of the London-Bristol connection ever being restored was an impossible dream in the minds of a few canal enthusiasts. So a few years later, naturally, it was restored and open again. Never under-estimate the British volunteer! By 2013 the trip was

possible, and Ruby, with her removable masts and retractable centreboard, was the perfect boat to do it in.

Apart from being seventy, and the trip being possible, there were other reasons for doing it. Having had a small and manly cancer removed a couple of years ago, I was feeling a little mortal, and wanted an adventure with my grandchildren, children and friends just in case. Because the trip varied from Atlantic to tidal Thames to Wiltshire pond, there were suitable legs for nautical friends, staunch sons and daughters and Hope Stilgoe (2). Reg (1), the youngest grandson, decide not to take part. Here they all are: -



The helpful friends, who are many, are not in the picture. Nor is my Dad, who is in the picture on the right. He is an important part of it all. He had been a cadet at Dartmouth just round the corner from Salcombe, gone into the Navy, got TB, been invalided out, and followed his father into civil engineering. My childhood trips with him to see reservoirs and viaducts being built had been the start of a lifelong enthusiasm for the sort of fearless building that produced the Kennet and Avon Canal, and Brunel's tunnels and railways and bridges, and other examples of man trying to force nature into submission. He was also a brilliant dinghy sailor, winning many redundant silver cigarette boxes in his International Fourteen in the thirties, both at Bourne End on the

Thames and at Cowes. When he died I went through his papers, and particularly his love letters to my mum, and discovered a romantic, thoughtful person I had hardly known. So this trip was to make sure that my children and grandchildren knew me a bit better than I had known my father, and to pit ourselves against the perils of H²O, whether salty and topped with angry spume and hiding half-submerged containers, or fresh, still, weedy and hiding completely submerged supermarket trolleys. Ultimately these perils are the reason we all go sailing, and the reason we so often don't; but in a well-prepared boat, you can sneak across a calm ocean to a distant shore. You reach harbour, you tie up, and for the next two days the sea, furious that you have duped it, boils with rage and takes revenge on those sailors still brave enough to be on it. Then it tires, and once again you tiptoe out and get home again.

The 'well-prepared boat' side of things is the first and by far the most complicated part. Ruby's engine, has been a source of constant worry. I am not lucky with engines, possibly because I am not diligent about maintaining them. Ruby's predecessors, Rebecca and Adelaide, both had engines that worked perfectly until they were needed, then behaved like a sullen teenager in Rebecca's case and a toddler with a tantrum in Adelaide's. Ruby had somehow got the same gene, and liked nothing better than boiling at inconvenient times. Last summer this happened less than half a mile after we set off fishing, days after another expensive repair. We anchored, still in the creek, and Stanley (9) said "Great – we can send up a flare and call the coastguard and the lifeboat". I explained that we couldn't do any of those things and he looked disappointed and said "well, we'd better fish for crabs to keep up morale." So we did that, and because none of us had a mobile phone signal Tom and Harry (twins, 14) swam for the shore and Rufus (46) came and rescued us in the dory. I thought all this was a disaster, but for the family it was of course far more fun than everything working properly. But it wasn't a recipe for a trouble-free voyage amid angry spume and half-submerged containers. So the bullet was bitten, and we replaced the engine with a new one of the same type. The cost was astronomical – not so much biting the bullet as swallowing the entire ammunition dump – but the peace of mind gained meant it was worth it. Just.

For a voyage of this nature you need permits for the Thames and the Inland Waterways. To get these permits you need a Boat Safety Certificate, whose requirements run to seventy-nine pages on the internet – requirements about gas fittings, WC plumbing, fire extinguishers and fuel tanks. You do not, incidentally, need a Boat Safety Certificate to sail across the Pacific or through the Southern Ocean; but for a stretch of canal in Berkshire where, in an emergency, you can safely get out and push the boat, a Boat Safety Certificate is something you must have. So I added more extinguishers, moved the battery isolator from its hiding place in a locker to somewhere a boat thief could easily find it, labelled all my seacocks and rang an approved inspector. And the inspector called, and failed the boat, and gave me a list of things I must do. Now I could at this point go into a rant about Elfin Safety and bureaucracy. But the main point on which we failed was the lack of the code ISO7840 on the fuel hoses. So the man who installed the new engine replaced them with new ones.



There is one of them. But this is what we found in the old ones:



Those three little jellied eels of diesel gunge lying in the old pipes were longing to be set free in the chop at the entrance to Dover harbour as we tried to dodge a ferry, in order to clog the injectors and bring us to a stop. Without the insistence on ISO7840, that is exactly what would have happened. And extra fire extinguishers are a good idea. And a fireman being able to find the battery

switch is probably more important than a thief not being able to find it. So, reluctantly, hurrah for the Boat Safety Scheme, and its sensible inspector (he was called Martin) who knew he was resented, but knew his job was to insist I made my boat safer, and did it.

Having readied Ruby for the sea, and bought charts, lifejackets for every size of grandchild, Duvalays (marvellous invention – half mattress, half sleeping bag), pillows, towels and spare everything and stored it all below, there was now no room to sleep on board. So B&Bs had to be booked in every port of call, on the shaky assumption that we would keep to my planned schedule.

We were going to do the trip in May and June to gain the longest hours of daylight and an unusual time when the Moon was as close to the Earth as it had ever been, giving very big spring tides. Of the 827 miles we were going to travel, 655 were in tidal waters. By setting off at tide-friendly times, more than a hundred of those miles would be provided by the sea moving in the right direction, with us in it. You don't get *that* sort of free help in the Mediterranean.

I sorted out crews, with sailing friends and family doing the tricky bits and landlubbers and tinies doing the easy bits, and on May 10th my sons Rufus and Jack arrived, ready and keen to cross Lyme Bay on our way to the Solent on the first, and longest leg. And as they arrived, so did the weather. If we had set out a week earlier, gentle sou-westerlies would have breezed us up channel in spring sunshine, and we would have been in Queenborough by now. Instead we have gales – proper gales – throughout the west country, and we cannot go anywhere. Or the next day, when we at least have a practice sail with Nigel Irens in the relative safety of Salcombe estuary. This gives us a chance to test – at least in light estuary air – the new bearing-out spar, which I shall explain later. But we are still stuck in harbour while the gales rage in the channel.

We've got to go soon. Rufus and Jack have to be back at work at some point. And – and after all, this is the reason for the whole trip – I'm not getting any younger.

Part Two: **ALL IN THE SAME BOAT.**



‘A journey of 827 miles begins with the untying of a single knot’ – new Chinese proverb.

After two days stuck in Waterhead Creek in the Salcombe estuary, we decided we had to begin our 827-mile circumnavigation of the South of England via sea, river and canal. Every navigator has at some point to decide to set off, and the reasons are always worth examining.

The weather forecast this morning says SW force 5-7. That may look risky, but the last two days have been force 8. So it's better. If the last two days had been force 3-4 it would have looked worse, and we might not have gone. If my sons Rufus and Jack had had as much control over their time as their retired father, and not been due back at work, we might not have gone. If, at six o'clock in the morning – in the often-deceptive morning calm – the forecast weather had been evident, we might not have gone. But we did go. And it was jolly exciting.

We put two sensible reefs in, and for the first three hours thought seriously about shaking them out again. We motored Ruby out of the harbour, and rounded Start Point. The tide was with us, and each of us had a bacon sandwich inside us, the wind was about force 4 from behind and we were sailing well with the new bearing –out spar.



Ruby has a loose-footed mainsail, which needs careful management when running before the wind. Nigel Irens, her designer, is therefore experimenting with a bearing out spar, which you can see above. You can also see the nervous expressions of my sons Jack and Rufus. The point of the bearing-out spar is to flatten the sail by exerting diagonal pressure to push out and down the bottom left hand corner (what Nigel would call the clew. Or the Baggywrinkle. Or something). It does this really well.

Until about three o'clock in the afternoon. By this time the wind has reached its predicted force seven, and we are sailing downwind very fast, often surfing down waves at 8 or 9 knots, and once touching 13.5. Ruby has a marvellously comfortable motion at sea, and is quite happy being pushed sideways by each chasing wave, but steering the inevitable series of swoops is tiring, so we have started watch-keeping, and Jack has gone below. The speed is partly the result of the bearing-out spar, which flattens the sail. But to keep the sail flat the spar has to stay straight, while the sail wants it to bend. The spar is an experimental construction of two windsurfer masts joined together with carbon fibre and epoxy, and with a tremendous bang it breaks at the joint, and the forward half falls into the sea, passing the non-sleeping Jack's porthole on the way, so he is soon back on deck. The other half trails in the sea, at a solid seven or eight knots, so we winch in the sail and undo it. It lies on the deck leering its epoxy-yellow grin at us from its broken end.

The mainsail is now harder to control, and Ruby rolls more than before, and occasionally gybes. On one gybe, the second disaster happens, as the yard comes particularly violently across, and removes the masthead light, which misses all of us as it falls into

the sea. So we now have the prospect of going through the Needles channel (which we do at 2130) in the twilight on a dead run with no lights and no way of persuading the sail to stay on one side. (The last time I did this trip was three years ago on Adelaide's last journey on her way to be sold, in a remarkable sunset created by the dust of the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull.)



Anyway, we miss the Needles, and Hurst Castle (night time is often easier, because lights are more precise navigational features than lumps of rock) and the Garmin plotter guides us safely on, while we take inaccurate bearings on places of interest to make sure the American military have their satellites in the right place. We have three approaches to navigation on board. Rufus is 46 and likes paper charts and names of buoys. Jack is 35, and IT-based. I am 70, and rely on bluff, guesswork, and "I've been here before". Surprisingly, we combine these three systems with easy harmony.

A sailing thought: – however windy it is, at least within normal parameters, it will take you somewhere and get you there quickly – as long as you are running, and as long as your destination is safe to enter. The speed and adrenalin will keep you and your crew in good shape, and you will enjoy it. The same conditions beating into the wind will debilitate you in a very short time, and be dangerous. We were safe running, but turning back would have been risky.

Just before we reach Yarmouth, where we are expected, we turn head to wind and drop the mainsail, (You do this by sheeting in the mizzen, whereupon Ruby turns helplessly head-to-wind. Brilliant) during the course of which I let go of the main halyard. Whereas the other two disasters involved things falling *down*, this one involves something falling *up*. The end of the main halyard, with its neat figure-of-eight knot, is now at the top of the mast. When we tie up in Yarmouth harbour (for once without incident, probably because it's also without audience) it is half past ten at

night, two and a half hours ahead of schedule because of our wild ride up-channel. We have lost the bearing-out spar and the masthead tricolour, and the knot at the end of the main halyard is sticking out of my beautiful new smooth-running ball-bearinged block nine metres above the deck – which might be a complete deal-breaker for the rest of the trip.

I spend all night not sleeping, pondering unlikely solutions – would the helpful chaps at the Shed in Cowes come out in the morning? Is there a rigger in Yarmouth? Can we find a lightweight teenager to send up the mast? A day's delay, at least, looks almost certain. However, on the cheerful side, we have done 100 miles in 16½ hours, we are tied up, and I have not killed my bright, helpful sons.

Just how bright and helpful becomes apparent the next morning. As we walk towards the shower block the next morning, having fallen asleep at 0614 and woken at 0615, Jack says, “That road bridge over the river – d’you think if I were up there and you moored underneath it I could reach the top of the mast with the boathook?” In no time we have cast off and tied up to the slimy wooden beams beneath the road bridge.



Using warps, we inch the boat forward until the mast is just missing the bridge. Jack inches upwards, standing on the railing and reaching out with the

boathook (with a bent wire coathanger tied to the end). At the third attempt he catches the knot, and pulls it down and lowers it to me on deck, and suddenly the voyage that had become impossible is possible again. I attach another twenty metres of rope to the halyard so it's less likely to happen again. As we motor back through the marina an early breakfast on the deck of a much grander yacht gives us an ironic round of applause. The only downer is the water taxi helmsman, who says "That's the second time I seen someone do that." All credit to Jack for the idea and the execution, and Rufus for conning the boat neatly into place without chopping the top of the mast off.

And that is the end of the list of disasters. That morning sees us zipping through the Solent with three reefs in. I find you tend to reef for yesterday's weather. We miss ferries (when you're sailing is the only time you really want to miss the ferry), Napoleonic forts, supertankers and rented yachts bearing groups of middle managers on a team-building day. We tie up at Cobnor Activity Centre in Chichester Harbour. This is full of happy activity – masses of teenagers roaring with laughter while capsizing and righting dinghies; any one of them would have been happy to climb the mast and rescue the figure-of-eight knot. Here I swop Jack and Rufus for my friend Drew Isaac, who is local, and next day he guides me to Newhaven where, to his surprise, he is interviewed by the BBC who are taking a sporadic interest in the trip. This *local* thing is a great comfort – on the parts of the trip I haven't done before I am accompanied by good sailors with local knowledge, and it makes a huge difference. Drew takes me through the Looe Channel outside Chichester Harbour. This is safe when wind and tide are with you, but still choppiest than the surrounding sea. Unadvised, I should have been nervous, but having someone with you who says "it's usually like this – and it's only a few hundred yards" takes away so much worry.

The real worry is, again, the weather. At 12.01 the BBC says the dreaded "There are warnings of gales in..." and then all the areas we have been in, are in, and are going to. My medicated blood runs cold, but my reassuring crew points out that this is all hours away, and we are indeed safely in Newhaven by half past two, fortified by small pork pies and coffee.

Incidentally, isn't a lot of nonsense talked about galleys? Most of us on boats want coffee, tea, soup, bacon sandwiches, bread and cheese and fruit and snacks, and a meal in a pub when we get

there. But boatbuilders feel the need to offer the full masterchef kitchen, perhaps thinking it will help 'Him' persuade 'Her' that buying the boat is a good idea. Wrong, I think. 'She' will see straight through that, as an attempt to get her to carry on doing the housework, but at an angle of thirty degrees. Much better to have our simple pair of two meths burners, so you can say 'You don't need to touch this, darling. This is where I make you coffee while you sit over there and sunbathe or read'.

Newhaven holds many memories - Annabel and I, when we were first together, used to live on a houseboat there. We were very poor – I was out of work and she was in the Glyndebourne chorus, and all we could afford was a Humber Keel Barge which I slowly converted into a slum. We are still amazed and grateful that Lizzie, from whom I had separated, allowed Rufus and Jemima, the children of my first marriage, to come and stay. Here is our houseboat:



The small boy on the left is now the Rufus who was half my crew on the first leg. The little girl on the right is now a GP in Exmouth, and part of the Bristol Channel crew later in the trip. The dog (Pushkin) has, alas, been and gone. The first people I met on arrival at Newhaven were a very friendly family of travellers living in a horsebox by the marina. This made the memory of the houseboat seem almost luxurious.

Newhaven could be a wonderful place; it has the best and safest harbour between the Solent and Folkestone, but urgently needs someone to recognise this, and do for it what Rick Stein has done for Padstow and Damien Hirst is doing for Ilfracombe.

The next day should have been me and the commodore of the Royal Southern sailing to Dover, but the predicted gale – force 9 this time – closed down the south coast and meant a day's delay. I had loaded some empty days into the plan, but we had already used most of them up, and the commodore wasn't available for the following day, nor were any of the family, or any of those already signed on for other bits. So Jenny, my PA, suggested Woody. I had met Woody, but didn't know him well. I rang him up, and five minutes later I had a crew for tomorrow. Annabel's houseboat experience has made her fairly sea-averse (I think it was the rats in the mud at low tide as much as anything) and she is still amazed that some people – me included - will drop everything for the chance of an adventure in the unpredictable channel. So a day later I give Woody an in-depth tour of the boat:



And we set sail for Dover.



Passing the Seven sisters (of which there appear to be eight)



And tying up in Dover Marina, helped by the ever-willing Port Control (Ch74) and Marina Control (Ch 80). Everywhere on the trip I found harbourmasters, berthing masters, coastguards and others to be friendly and helpful. Today's tides have been particularly helpful as well – if you leave Newhaven at HW Dover plus 6, you get a surprising eight hours of helpful tide.

In the right hand picture above you can see half of Ruby's dinghy. The other half is underneath, because this is a Nestaway – a two-part pram dinghy which makes a solid, proper rowing boat with optional sailing rig. Much more expensive than an inflatable, but much quicker to deploy and much more fun.

I stay in a hotel in Dover which is also hosting a gipsy wedding. Dover is a good place for this, because the guests can get there from all over Europe. I have no clear memory of the evening.

The next day, after checking that I can see France from my bedroom, I go to the famous chandlers Sharp and Enright, where Sarah behind the counter recognises me off the television, just as some months ago she recognised Griff, Rory and Dara when they came in. I am honoured; but they don't have a new masthead light of the right make, so I settle for some special-offer boots. Back on board, I am joined by the commodore for the trip to Ramsgate. Because I am in august company, I then make a schoolboy mistake.

High Water Dover today is 1628. Half past four. We need to leave one hour earlier. Which is 3.30. Which is 1330, isn't it? So I have written down 1330 – not 1530, but 1330. Not only is the wind against us, but now the tide as well. He is very nice about

it, and we still make Ramsgate easily, passing Goodwin Sands where I once played cricket:



(Cricket fans will spot John Emburey, John Snow and John Price; also present are Robert Powell, Leslie Thomas and Bob Bevan supporting the lovely Laura Collins, now Mrs Bevan.)

Goodwin Sands is being investigated by a drilling rig, which we assume is part of another wind farm plan. We find out later it is recovering a second world war Dornier bomber, which breaks the surface a week after we pass.



We navigate with proper charts and the Garmin, but Colin (which is the commodore's name) has an I-pad with Navionics software on it, which is far more accurate than a brand new Admiralty chart when it comes to cardinals, etc. We enter Ramsgate at 1635, three hours after leaving, I think, but I no longer trust myself with the 24-hour clock. Colin signs me in at the Royal Temple Yacht Club, where we have a pint with a local seadog. Colin goes home while I meander round this very appealing town, which is slightly raffish and lively, especially on a Friday night with the girls in their stratospheric weekend shoes and the lads gelled-up to impress. The slightly louche atmosphere is not alleviated by this sign:



which I'm sure is entirely innocent.

Rufus joins me again, and we stay in the excellent Royal Harbour, a B&B with proper vinyl albums played on a proper gramophone, cheese and biscuits at 9pm (2900 hours? God knows) for the peckish, and copies of Van Gogh pictures on the walls done in 3-D corrugated cardboard. Bet the old Dutch ginge wishes he'd thought of that!

Next to us in Ramsgate harbour is a Dehler 34 which *did* go sailing on the day of the gle, when we were stuck in Newhaven. Here is what happened to her mast:



The gales have moved on, and Saturday is fine and gentle – variable 3-4, which means more motorsailing. We round North Foreland and creep inside the windfarms off Margate, from where one of the residents who had seen the BBC piece on the local news recognised the boat and took this picture



Thus blowing our cover; this is, of course, Ruby with her support vessel.

All of this part of the voyage is a matter of staring at the echo sounder. We were constantly in 11-16 feet of water – thus at least keeping us out of the way of bulk carriers and other big things – mostly above a firm sandy bottom. Perfect place for an airport. Why has no-one thought of that?

Turning left at the ghostly wreck of the USS Montgomery, we tie up at Queenborough Yacht Club's pier in the River Medway. The yacht club is as friendly as everywhere else, and recommends a pub round the corner –the Old House at Home. Rufus and I stay here, have a delicious grilled cod fillet, and watch Bonnie Tyler fail to win Eurovision glory for Britain. Denmark wins, for heaven's sake.

Breakfast at the Old House At Home is served by Arthur, well into his eighties and suffering from Raynaud's disease. While we eat it, the other resident of the pub rolls out her bungee mat outside the saloon bar and does twenty-five minutes of Pilates. We pay for our room and supper (the Pilates demo is free) and walk down to the yacht club pier, using our special tokens to get through the heavily locked turnstile. The Isle of Sheppey is definitely high

security, and boasts three prisons and a slight feeling of an independent wild-west-based legal system. But, as everywhere else, we have been warmly welcomed. The boat community knows that it has to be friendly, because one day we may need each other. A society based on interdependence is happier than one based on competition.

Leaving the Medway and returning to the shallows of the Thames, we are interviewed by a police RIB to check that we are not Al Qaeda (damned cunning of Al Qaeda to turn up in a 29'6" old gaffer) and overtaken by Ardwina, a Thames barge which has taken part in yesterday's Medway Barge match.



We catch up, and follow her all the way up river. This is a great relief – instead of dodging from waypoint to waypoint in search of deep enough water, we are behind a skilled captain who is confident enough to keep to the shallows, and thus avoid the adverse tide we have for the first few hours. A Lancaster and a Hurricane fly past. And, to add to our pleasure, New Zealand collapse to 29 for 6 on Test Match Special, and Rufus and I beam at each other while the container ships in the deep channel pass safely by.

The river narrows, and becomes bendier. Sailing is tricky, but with the main sheeted in amidships we are quite close winded, and can tack under the QE2 bridge.



We now have the tide with us, are making seven knots, and New Zealand are 68 all out and we have won the test match. There are no better ways to arrive in London, and everyone with a boat should do it once. At the cruise liner terminal, Ardwinia brails her sails and we lower ours, because you are not allowed to sail through the Thames barrier.



Then, dodging speedy catamaran ferries, we pass the O², with successful climbers on the top, and then Wren's wonderful buildings at Greenwich. As well as being a cadet at Dartmouth, my Dad also studied at Greenwich when it was a Royal Naval College. At both places he was always second in the exams; in both places he was always beaten by a student called D.N.T.H.Webber, who I thought of four days ago when we passed Beachy Head, for the tragic reason you may have guessed from those two often-tragic words. On the first of August 1935 my Dad wrote to Joan, his fiancée and later my Mum, "Webber, who was found at the foot of Beachy Head last week, was the fellow I

shared a room with all the time I was at Greenwich”. This is so sad – but then he follows it with “He was unlucky in not finding the same source of hope and joy of living that I have found in you”.

Which is a wonderful thing to say to anyone. Lucky Mum. Poor Webber.

We set off early this morning, and it’s just as well we did. Our destination is Limehouse Marina, and a call to them elicits the information that they close at 1800. But the tide is with us, the new engine is willing and we are in their lock by 1715, and tied up at 1740.



The next day Jim and Steve and their lorry come to take away Ruby’s mast. Her first owner was a Dutchman called Ries, and he had to do this quite often so developed a system. You put a pole – called a gin pole – in a socket behind the mast. Then, with a block and tackle at the top of the gin pole, you lift the mast out. Thus:



Ruby and I have now done 314 nautical miles – the furthest I have ever sailed in so short a time. Rufus has been brave, calm and resourceful, as have Jack, Drew, Woody and Colin. We have won the Test Match, and we are now a motor boat, ready to go west across country.

Part three: **WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE.**



“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” people say, which is pretty stupid really, but every time I have crossed a bridge over a river – when I came to it, and not before - I have wanted to see the bridge from beneath, from my boat. This part of my trip is a chance to do just that – to navigate underneath almost every interesting bridge I have ever crossed.

Whereas the sea leg, from Salcombe to Limehouse, was a chance for tough friends and sons to show their paces, this part, from London to Bristol, should be easier, and give a chance for grandchildren to show their mettle. So we set off from Limehouse Marina, in unseasonal sleet, with my son Rufus and my grandchildren Alex (11) and Bobbie(9), to go up the tidal Thames and beyond. Not strictly speaking a journey for yachties, but just as thrilling, I found.

The Thames flows fast, and you have to go with it. Limehouse opens its lock gates four hours before high tide if, like us, you only draw 2’6”, so we emerged from the lock into the full flow, with the North Sea rushing to fill up the Thames all the way to Teddington.



We have gone into black and white, because first we go back in time. We are passing Wapping, where the London Stilgoes built ships in the seventeenth century. Humphrey Stilgoe, ship's carpenter in the Vanguard, his son Jeremiah who captained the Rebecca and his son Zachary. Zachary is important here. He is a cousin of my six-greats grandfather, also called Zachary Stilgoe, a farmer in Deddington in Oxfordshire, who is also the eight-greats grandfather of Zachary Stilgoe aged six, who will later be part of the crew. We have almost always had a Zachary in the family, and this poor mite is the current holder of the short straw. The Deddington Zachary was an entirely respectable person who died in 1669, leaving twelve pence apiece to each of his grandchildren. The London Zachary was more exciting – he built a ship called the Orrery for Sir William Petty, (inventor of the catamaran), never got paid, went bust, joined the East India company and drowned in 1702 in his ship, which was called Ruby. He is the reason my boat is called Ruby, and I hope she has better luck than his Ruby did. I hope also to avoid the fate of his sister-in-law Elizabeth Stilgoe, who on January 12th 1676 confessed that she “...assaulted a certain Edmund Yates, beat and maltreated him so that his life was despaired of.” She was fined three shillings and fourpence. (Remember the wartime radio message, “Send re-inforcements, we’re going to advance”, which was taken down as “Send three and fourpence, we’re going to a dance.”)

Enough of the rascal London Stilgoes - though it's all true. We are about to embark on a tour of London, from the best place to see it from.



Alex (11) escaping from the tower. We passed the Globe, the National, the Festival Hall - all my old workplaces.



The Houses of Parliament, where I have been to complain, and MI6, where I haven't. And, eventually, Battersea power station, here recorded by Bobbie. I am not the first person to make this voyage, but I am almost certainly the first to be accompanied by a Zebra.



On we went, past the wharf where I had concreted the bottom of the houseboat in 1972, under Battersea Bridge where Holly and Mabel (3) nearly took a picture, under Putney Bridge where Lizzie (first wife) took this



Under Chiswick Bridge where Joe (34) took a picture he hasn't sent me yet (he is a jazz musician) and on to Richmond Lock, which doesn't lower its mighty gates until three quarters of an hour before high tide, so we have to wait.



For years the Thames was a battleground between fishermen, who wanted weirs, and bargemen, who didn't. In 1630 the first lock was built at Abingdon – with a weir for the fishermen and a lock for the barges – and by the end of the eighteenth century the whole river was locked and navigable. These big locks take several boats at a time, and are operated by lock-keepers, so Thames boat-owners have to be less self-sufficient and sometimes less skilled, and are not always as perfectly polite as other mariners. I was surprised at this.

We are ushered through Teddington lock, and on upstream past Hampton Court, and many unloved craft which have failed to provide the dream they were bought for, or a tenth of the fun I am having.



We spend the night tied up at the bottom of Lynn Lewis' garden in Shepperton. Lynn was a reporter with me on Nationwide at the BBC, and when he left started a little thing called Nauticalia which one or two of you may have heard of. Their first product was the Seasearcher magnet – a magnet so powerful that wherever you put it on the boat it drove the compass crazy. The next day Rufus' wife Clare joins us, and with Alex and Bobbie the Zebra we join a convoy with a narrowboat, a cabin cruiser and a Chelsea supporter (the flag is a giveaway) and his partner who have all the seamanship you would expect from a Chelsea supporter and his partner. With them we pass Chertsey, Penton Hook, Runnymede, Magna Carta Island and the house Rufus and Clare didn't buy at Wraysbury.



They still regret it. We stop under the shadow of Windsor Castle for lunch, which brings back many rather boastful memories. In 1982 I did a terrifying cabaret for the Royal family, with the lights on and all of them there. Then in 2005 Peter Skellern and I were part of the entertainment for the Queen's eightieth birthday party. We did our notorious line-dancing demonstration, which made the Queen laugh a gratifying amount.

In 2013 I went along to be knighted, and took Annabel, Holly, Jack and Jemima with me. The man at the door saw me and said, "You've been here before, haven't you? For the lap-dancing!" I said no, it was the line-dancing, but by then it was too late and my family were giving me funny looks and wondering what sort of private club Prince Andrew was running in the castle.

We tied up for the night at Oakley Court. I had filmed a sequence from a spoof horror movie here in the seventies, and Hammer films used it often as a location.



It is now a hotel, and because it was Saturday there was a wedding. We were in good time and had a safe mooring, so I climbed into the lazarette to clean out the cockpit drains. You have to get right inside, and are then invisible. The newly-weds had chosen my pretty boat as a background to their wedding pictures and were really quite surprised when what could have been a Hammer film monster sweatily emerged from the locker behind them. The bride did scream a bit. But wedding days are about memories, aren't they? Here are Rufus and family, and Doctor Frankenstein.



We pass more houses none of us could afford in Bray and Maidenhead,



and go through bank-holiday-busy Boulter's lock to the beautiful and peaceful Cliveden reach, where a man called Thompson wrote Rule Britannia, and Thomas Arne set it to music. The people who ruled Britannia in 1963 were brought down by the man who lived in this cottage – Stephen Ward, the subject of Andrew Lloyd Webber's new musical. When Lizzie and I were married, the National Trust refused to let us rent the cottage because of the danger of tiny Rufus and even tinier Jemima falling in the river. Good call, probably.



Having stopped to see Lynn Lewis, it is only fair that we go and see Michael and Dilys Barratt. Michael was Nationwide's anchorman, and I learnt so much from him. He and Dilys live where Andrews boatyard used to be – the people who made the lovely slipper-stern Thames launches – in Bourne End. This is the longest reach of the Upper Thames, and contains the Upper Thames Sailing club, where they race the graceful, tall-rigged Thames Raters.



Back in 1936, the same clubhouse rang to the happy laughter (I hope) of John and Joan Stilgoe, carrying all before them in the Fourteen foot international Goshawk.

UPPER THAMES S.C. (AT BOURNE END)
 INTERNATIONAL 14FT. DINGHY CLASS.—
 Goshawk (J. and Mrs. Stilgoe), 4hr. 30min. 40sec., 1 ;
 Tuical (H. Scott Freeman), 4hr. 30min. 42sec., 2 ; Swift
 (W. H. Godfrey), 4hr. 32min. 17sec., 3 ; Jove (E. N. A
 Remington), 4hr. 38min. 15sec., 4 ; Daring (— Muir),
 4hr. 33min. 58sec., 5 ; Peregrine (H. D. Morgan), 4hr.
 36min. 24sec., 6.

Here is my Dad a year later – not with my Mum as crew, because by then she is expecting my sister Dawn.



At Marlow, we have a change of crew, and add my friend Charles, who has a boat on this stretch of river. We also have a change of weather. Annabel joins us, with Holly, Bert(5) and Mabel(3). Holly's husband Nick looks after Reg, because Reg is only one. Here we are going down the Henley course, where Holly once coxed her college eight.



Bert really enjoyed this. Mabel didn't.



We passed one oddity on the way. When Annabel and I lived on our Newhaven houseboat, I tried to save the relationship by finding a nicer mooring for it. I scoured the river Thames, and the one place that would have us was a plot in Sonning owned by the Baha'i world faith. We never moved there, but here it is – still waiting for us to tie up in the rain.



It doesn't look that welcoming. But you should have seen the muddy creek in Newhaven. At Sonning we swop crews again, and let the grown-ups have a go – two friends of mine, both called Christopher. Over the next couple of days, this causes endless confusion.



We have now left the Thames, and travelled through Reading on the canalised Kennet. From now on we are self-sufficient, using our specially purchased windlass handles to raise and lower the paddles on the locks. Again we are amazed by the engineering; these locks all date back to the pick-and-shovel days at the end of the eighteenth century. More modern, but nearly as impressive, are the swing bridges; you work these with a special key on a key-ring labelled Sanitation Station. The sense of Wagnerian power as you turn the key and stop the mighty roar of Aldermaston's traffic is irresistible.



The Christopher confusion grows more complex, so we add my son Joe's best man Paddy, who lives locally. He is experienced and tireless. And not called Christopher. He turns out to be *our* best man as well.



One of the Christophers is in the boat trying to remember which Christopher he is; Paddy is on shore supremely confident with the vital windlass handle. He has done this before, and is energetic and useful, and is aware that he must compensate for the older generation with their titanium hips, knees and kapok memories. We all enjoy the supreme prettiness of the canal – goslings, ducklings, cygnets and a mayfly which wastes a decent percentage of its short life on the other Christopher's finger. We pass through Newbury, and Monkey Marsh lock, which is turf-sided, an ancient monument and cost £300,000 to renovate. It has a self-appointed curator who explains about lifting paddles gradually to reduce scour, and operates everything for us. He is huge, with long grey hair, and could play Fafner in the Key-ring, our new Wagnerian drama.

The lock after this has not drama, but tragedy. Two narrow boats tied together, side by side, one with a bent rudder caused by not obeying the “keep boat forward of cill marker” dictat, which really means the opposite.



The canal gets very shallow, and occasionally the prop churns up some gravel, but we speed up and arrive at Kintbury. We have, thanks to Paddy,(who by the time anyone reads this will be the landlord of the George and Dragon in Hurstbourne Tarrant in Hampshire) done 12 miles and 17 locks in the day. We get the train back to Reading from the canalside station, and pass Aldermaston , where the day began, in 25 minutes. We felt very superior to the noisy smelly trains as we took 8½ hours to do this journey. We now feel very superior to the boats as we speed back.

The next day is as different as could be. I spend it at Feltham Young Offenders Institution overseeing the end of a song-writing course with the Orpheus students and tutors. This is an exciting exercise in energising young people at the bottom of the heap, and they have written some strong, inspiring stuff. Annabel and I then drive back to this rural heaven, and stay with friends who have restored and improved an extra-heavenly part of it – as far removed from the young offenders’ lives as it is possible to be. We are joined by our dear friends Peter and Diana Skellern, who are tomorrow’s crew. I don’t think I have ever had a day which such different levels of privilege at its margins.

The next day – possibly because of the stress of the previous one – I am not feeling tip-top, so am something of a passenger. It is the first of June, and for once is glorious. There are red kites above us, and Diana teaches me the response to “a pinch and a punch for the first of the month” which Annabel is always quicker than me

at, she being in charge of dates. The response is “a slap and a kick for being so quick”, and that knowledge is going to make life so much less painful from now on. For me at least.



Peter, as is his wont, sketches the slowly passing scene – which is well worth sketching, and passes slowly enough to sketch.



Two consecutive hills we pass have a white horse – one copied from the other to keep up with the next village. The next hill has a white amorphous blob that looks a bit like a fish. The community apparently did not have the necessary skills to do the horse, for which you really need the artist hovering 200ft up in a Chinook, but I like to think they ran a desperate marketing campaign to re-name the district the Vale of the White Fish.

The summit of the canal, 452 ft above sea level, is obviously the hardest bit to get water to – and the most necessary, because it drains in both directions. So two hundred years ago they installed a magnificent steam engine at Crofton, which pumps water from a well deep in the chalk to keep the canal topped up.

It still works, but being the OLDEST STEAM ENGINE IN THE WORLD needs the occasional service, which it is having when we pop in to see it.



I am cheered by this beast, and begin to recover. But the greatest aid to my recovery is the encounter with the sour woman.

She has got off a narrowboat which her husband has parked almost completely across the canal. She marches up to the lock we are in and says to Peter (pointing at Diana) “Get her to close that gate”. Peter bristles, and closes the gate himself. We get out of the lock, but as Annabel and Diana open the gates, she says, “We only need one gate.” Peter points out that we are wider, and need both. She snorts, and gives him a look. “Have they got steam up at Crofton?” she demands. We say they haven’t, but they do a very nice cheese toastie - we’ve just been there for lunch. “You’d think they would have, it being half term”. She snorts again. We watch while the neat and terrified husband drives the narrowboat into the lock. Annabel says to me “What a sour woman.” And then we notice that it says on the side of the boat’s cabin in perfect narrowboat capitals, “The Sauer Family”. This keeps us all happy for hours.

The next spectacular sight is the Bruce tunnel – 502 yards long and, yes, there is a light at the end of it. All of it dug, like the canal itself and the Crofton well, 150 years before the JCB. It is named after Thomas Brudenell-Bruce, an ancestor of Bo Bruce who nearly won the Voice on TV.



We stay the night in another B&B. Last night's had an owner with a life story too personal to repeat but one obviously repeated to every guest who stayed there. Tonight's has as our fellow guests the Stretford Wheelers – six cyclists of a certain age who are too old for lycra but don't give a damn. You don't get this variety in a Premier Inn.

Then we set out along the Long Pound – not something only Robert Peston would understand, but the 15-mile section at the middle of the canal. It is calm and beautiful, with even a kingfisher at one point, and set about with pillboxes with gun slits – Sir Edmund Ironside's 1940 Blue Line of Defence against Hitler, who he believed would invade via the canal system. These are sad, ridiculous, and smell slightly of Private Godfrey's little problem. Eventually there are locks again – locks which Annabel is now highly skilled at



– and we reach Devizes.

At Devizes Annabel and the Skellerns go home, and I gain Joe our youngest son (hear his wonderful talents on joestilgoe.com), his new bride Katie and my old Liverpool schoolfriend Gordon and his wife Joan. Gordon and I were in the Peewit patrol in the scouts together – the sort of bond that is with you for life. He and Joan have a narrowboat and their own windlass handles, and are here to do the Caen Hill flight, which they have never done but always dreamed of.



The Caen Hill flight is legendary – a staircase of sixteen locks falling 131 ft. The guidebook says you allow five or six hours to do it. With Gordon and Joan's expert tuition - they are often two locks ahead sorting things out – we do it in 2 hours 10 minutes.



In fact we do thirty locks in the day, and collapse into the next B&B at three pm. Joe and Katie and I carry on the next day on possibly the prettiest stretch of all, though the idyll is marred by our first and only engine terror. We reverse into some weed. The engine stops. I start it again. Everything is fine, except for the seven heartbeats I will never see again. Through Bradford-on-Avon, where Joe and Katie are prevented from showing-off their lock gate skills by four high-viz-jacketed volunteers of great cheeriness, to Limpley Stoke and the Dundas basin, where the canal crosses the River Avon on the wonderful aqueduct. Here, you may remember, is where I had the germ of the idea for this trip when I was a schoolboy. The current crop of schoolboys are scampering down the towpath, and it is as beguiling as I remember it.



Another change of crew; it is Saturday morning, and I am joined by Jack, who was with me on the first day across Lyme bay, his wife Faith, and Zachary (6, and namesake of the Zachary Stilgoe who captained the original Ruby for the East India Company in the 1690s), Leo(4) and Hope(2). What could be a dull day on the water is enlivened for the children by the presence of three crews of pirates. One way of doing a stag weekend is to start at the Cross Guns in Limpley Stoke, hire a narrowboat and some costumes, and do Treasure Island impressions down the canal. The first crew of eight brigands and a parrot arrives at half past eight, already well lagered-up, and creating a frisson in the basin. They are entirely friendly, but there is a whiff of danger which sits oddly with the rural idyll. We go on our quiet way, and approach the stunning creation that is Bath – one of those rareties where man takes a beautiful place and makes it more beautiful. The yellow/grey houses above and beside the canal are gorgeous.



We stop for lunch in Bath, and are joined by Annabel's sister Carolyn and by Clare, who taught Jack to do sums at primary school. Jack is now a university lecturer, so she obviously did a good job. Faith takes the grandchildren home, and Jack and I negotiate the hire boats and the even drunker pirates through the six big locks that take us down to the level of the Avon river.



We also hit our first and only submerged supermarket trolley, without significant damage.

Next day is the final push to Bristol; a bigger river, bigger locks. So we are borrowing muscle from Monkton Combe School near the Dundas Basin. Henry and Adam are sixth formers, and sturdy and willing and bright. We lend them wet weather gear, because they have naturally turned up with three thin garments and an I-phone each.



They are quick to learn, and we make good progress. This stretch of river is much busier, with many Sunday morning rowing eights and scullers (Their school practises rowing on this reach). We meet a barge full of girl guides, some Norwegian tourists, a water gipsy who has done the same trip we are doing and several special needs groups. One of the reasons we meet them all are the 16 ft wide locks, which mean we can squeeze in beside a narrowboat. There is pretty countryside as far as KEYNSHAM, which all of my generation spells out loud in memory of Horace Bachelor, who used to advertise his Infra-Draw Method of winning the football pools on Radio Luxembourg in the fifties, and lugubriously spell out the address.

Netham Lock is open, because the tidal Avon arriving from the west is at the same height as the freshwater Avon arriving from the east. The lock keeper recognises me, and does the piano-playing mime to show that he has. This happens rarely nowadays, but it sometimes smoothes my path, as it does now. He waves us through, and suddenly the GPS finds itself again, and shows us on a big river, instead of what looks like the Sahara, and begins to sniff the sea. We motor through Bristol's waterfront. When I first worked here in 1966 in a musical by Julian Slade to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Theatre Royal, Bristol's waterfront was a sad and crumbling sight. But, like London where we started this part of the journey, the warehouses on the river are now galleries and flats, and the two cities embrace their maritime heritage. In Bristol's case, the floating harbour gives them a vibrant stretch of water in the middle of the city, with Brunel's S.S. Great Britain in its drydock and a replica of the Matthew, in which John Cabot sailed to Newfoundland in 1492, jockeying for position with the youngsters learning in their dinghies.



We tie up in our pre-arranged berth at the Marina, fill the boys with chips and a probably illegal pint, and take them back to school.

It has taken sixteen days to get from Reading to Bristol – well, eight really, because some of those days I have been at home working, in prison song-writing or enjoying summer treats with Annabel. John Rennie's canal traversing the south of England is a marvel, as is its restoration. Brunel's Great Western Railway, its name now ruthlessly purloined by First Great Western, is another marvel. When I later come back to Bristol from Reading on the train it takes just over an hour. The canal takes eight days. I know which I enjoyed more.

Part Four. NO PORT LEFT



We went to Bristol in a lorry – Jim, Steve and me. What's not to like? as they say. We took with us Ruby's mast, to turn her from this into this



Then we set off on the last part of the adventure. Ruby and I had sailed out of Salcombe, up the English channel, round Kent to London, taken the mast down, negotiated the Thames and the Kennet and Avon Canal, and were now about to do the trickiest part – down the Bristol Channel, round Land's End and back to Salcombe. The crew on the inland leg had been family, including most of the grandchildren, but from now on this was old salts' work, so I was joined by Jules, who looks after the boat in Salcombe, my daughter Jemima and her family who spend most of their time under water,

Nigel Irens who designed Ruby and Peter Skellern, with whom I have played the piano and sailed (though never at the same time) for years and years.

The reason for upping the skill level of the crew is that once you set off down the Bristol Channel there are almost no hiding places – no ports on the left. Our first leg had to get us to Ilfracombe, 65 miles away, and everyone said we'd never get there in a day. I have never heard so much nay-saying in my life – and this in the city of Cabot, Brunel and Long John Silver. Most of the boat-owners in Bristol Marina admitted they'd never been down the Avon to Avonmouth, so the river had all the mystique of the Roaring Forties – “You'll be up against tides of 6knots/10knots” – one advisor quoted fifteen knots. On the chart and in the tide Atlas I could find no tide faster than 4.4 knots, and started to plan the passage; if we got to Avonmouth at High Water, which meant battling the rising tide as we went down river, we would have five hours of the year's best spring tides taking us where we wanted to go. By the time the tide turned we should be most of the way there, as long as we weren't up against a strong south-westerly wind pushing Atlantic waves towards us. On the appointed day there was no wind, gentle seas, and Jules and I set forth at 0625, just as Bristol's first hot air balloon took off.



They stopped the early rush-hour traffic for us, opened the bridges and let us into the lock – a huge affair quite unlike the locks we had been dealing with. This is 15 metres wide and 75 metres long, and big enough for the SS Great Britain. We drop the 5metres or so to the level of the river, the gates open and we are waved on our way with much head-shaking.

It is two hours before high tide, so waiting for us, instead of the benign green fresh(ish) water we have been used to, is salty muddy cappuccino coming at us at two knots. We can make six knots under power, so we force ourselves downstream at four knots, through driftwood and a surprising number of lost footballs. At 0730 we go under Brunel's wonderful Clifton Suspension Bridge.



The Avon Gorge becomes prettier and the traffic quieter, and after an hour and a quarter we pass under the M5 – the last bridge of the trip.



We are back at sea. The sea, as we pass Avonmouth and turn left towards Land's End, is still going the other way. We are only making 3.2 knots over the ground, but are an hour ahead of my deliberately pessimistic schedule. Off Portishead a pair of sailing yachts seem to be going sideways into the wind – a sort of reverse leeway. We join them inshore in the tidal eddy that only locals know about, and suddenly are doing 5.7 knots. There is a little useable breeze, so we put up the main and gain perhaps half a knot while motorsailing. The terrifying waters of the

Bristol Channel are benign, still, and about to turn and take us south-west.

So it is time for the tiller-pilot, the cup of coffee, the bacon sandwich and some reflection.

Charts. A chart is one of the few things nowadays on which we use a pencil and a rubber. It is big, and you are only going to use a tiny bit of it if all goes well – the bit along which you hope to travel. That leaves acres of sea on which to write information. Do this - all the high water times you might need, the weather forecasts, the phone numbers and VHF channels for all the harbour masters along the route. You can rub them out next time. This way you need not search for a damp almanac in the middle of the night, because all the voyage's information is in one place.

On the bit of the chart you *do* need, draw the track you hope to sail along, and using your known probable speed and any help or hindrance the tide will give you, mark where you think you'll be hour by hour. Not where you *hope* to be, but where you *think* you'll be. Then when you actually start, mark your actual position hour by hour in the normal way. If you have been pessimistic in your planning, and your actual position is better, this will cheer you up. Likewise, if you have been optimistic and your actual position is worse, this will worry you.

In two tide-assisted hours off Cardiff and Barry, we travelled 19.4 nautical miles. By the time the tide turned we had covered 43 miles from Avonmouth, were 15 miles from Ilfracombe, and could hug the daunting, unapproachable Exmoor coast to creep down channel against the increasingly hostile stream.



We were inspected by a lone porpoise off Combe Martin, and admired the pretty Watermouth harbour – pretty, but highly tidal. By 1645 we are sneaking into welcoming Ilfracombe.



The entrance to Ilfracombe is dominated by its own Statue of Liberty, a huge and impressive pregnant woman called Verity, the work of famous local boy and shark-pickler Damien Hirst. The sculpture has received mixed reviews from the local people - some people don't like it much, and some absolutely hate it.

Having beaten our schedule so efficiently, we are far too early.

Ilfracombe is welcoming, but just as tidal as everywhere else. The difference is that it has a safe place to wait while the inner harbour fills up, and soon we creep in and find a visitor's mooring. We fit the beaching legs for the first time on this trip, and build the Nestaway dinghy. While we are doing this we watch both sides of young Ilfracombe at play –two jetskiers filling their outboard with petrol, each with a lighted fag between his lips, while the rowing-gig crews (mixed, smiling and keen) set out for evening practice. Neither group bothers the other - this seems a happy place, and if Damien Hirst's sculpture and gallery and restaurant (which we try later – it's terrific) bring more people here, then they won't be disappointed.

Next morning, Jules has to go back to work, and I have important things to attend to; England are playing New Zealand in a 20/20 at the Oval. I take the National Express coach to Victoria, which takes six and a half hours and is a strange contrast to the sea voyage.

After two balls England are 2 for 1, the rain comes down and the match is abandoned. Compensation next day, when Annabel and I go to Wimbledon and see Laura Robson in fine form. Then on Saturday I am back on board, this time with daughter Jemima, her husband Jim and two of their boys, Tom (15) and Stanley(10), to sail to Padstow. Tom's twin brother Harry is unable to be with us. The immensely helpful harbour master has stored the dinghy and the

oars for us, sells us some diesel (I carry paranoid amounts of extra fuel) and we deconstruct the dinghy, store enormous amounts of picnic and family luggage below, and are off early. There is very little wind, though SW4/5/6 is forecast, and a lumpy, Stuger-on-challenging sea.

Tom has discovered he should have been playing cricket, so embarrassed phone calls have to be made. Then, being fifteen, he does what fifteen year-olds do best.



Today I have over-estimated tidal gains, so actual positions are a bit behind, and I worry – partly about sleeping Tom, partly about sleeping Jemima, who is sleeping not because she is a teenager but because she is a hard-working GP and mother. Jim is awake, because he is a consultant and apparently on call 24/7/52, and Stanley is awake because he is having a good time, and is full of practical suggestions and questions. “Would this boat capsize?(no) I’ve capsized in a Pico. Where are the flares? Can we set off a flare? (no) Where is the engine? How old is Ruby?” (seventeen) We have a good sail in the wrong direction for half an hour to keep him interested.

The shoals off Hartland Point are particularly nasty, but Ruby bobs happily about, and Stan asks more questions about capsizing. Luckily Tom and Jemima are still asleep and don’t hear him. Once

round the point we can sail a course – not the one we want, but close. A long slog across Bideford Bay therefore takes longer than planned, but it does mean that we arrive at the Camel estuary at the right time. This area – Padstow Bay, Rock, Polzeath are all three-hours-either-side-of-the-tide places, so without the delays we would have been frustratingly early. Jim and Jemima have been here many times, so guide me in safely past the Camel Water Ski School (which conjures up a great picture in the imagination; does a camel use two skis or four?) By 2145 we are tied up in Padstow's inner harbour and in Pucelli's eating pasta. This has been a nervous day for me, because of having precious cargo on board, but we have done it, and are now more than six hundred miles into the 827-mile round trip.

The next day is a day off. These are quite tricky to handle when the days book-ending them are so frenetic but eventually, after croissant or two, you adjust. Padstow is the home of Rick Stein and his nine restaurants, B&Bs and boulangeries. Rick Stein is as important to Padstow as Damien Hirst is becoming to Ilfracombe, - or indeed as the late David Niven was to Motor Neurone disease or Joanna Lumley to the Gurkhas. There is no substitute for celebrity glitter if you want the world to pay attention to your cause. I was once a co-reader with Rick at a carol concert in aid of the Sparrow Schools Choir of South Africa, and I hoped this might get me a table at his legendary Seafood Restaurant, for which you normally need to register at birth. In fact I simply popped in before lunch and asked if they had a table for one that evening. There is always a table for one available in case Giles Coren turns up. I smiled, waited, and tried to exude the aura of a restaurant critic, and it worked. And no, they didn't know who I was – any maitre d' who knew who I was retired in 1997. It's only lock-keepers now.

Having sorted out supper, I went and sat on the boat and did all the things that need doing on a boat – screwing a fire extinguisher back on, tying back noisy halyards, coiling ropes, cleaning, topping up water and diesel, inspecting oil and coolant levels, throwing away bacon that has gone green and drawing pessimistic lines on tomorrow's chart. Meanwhile the excellent Roche Town Brass Band (Roche is near St Austell) played the Floral Dance on the quay while a South American woman painted children's toenails and a self-knitted hempen person braided teenage girls' hair and holiday makers ate ice-cream in light drizzle. It was all just as nice as can be. Padstow is the safest harbour on the North Cornish coast – a safe

place for yachtsmen, fishermen and holiday-makers all the way up to David Cameron. Because people feel safe, they're friendly. The inner harbour advertises itself as opening its lock-gate two hours either side of high tide – I thought before this trip that I was hard done by on my East Portlemouth mud mooring, only able to get off when the tide was in. But the Bristol Channel has the same limitations all along – Watchet, Portishead, Minehead, St Ives, Watermouth, Barry – all are only available a few hours a day, and woe betide anyone who runs for shelter at the wrong time. In fact Padstow offered only *three* hours of access on the days we were there – but three very friendly hours, and a surprising amount of space on this so-far sparsely populated voyage.

I turned up at the appointed time at Rick Stein's for my single table. The single table in restaurants is usually by the door, so you see all the comings and goings, which is nice. Most people were having a lovely time – a birthday, an end-of-holiday treat, a family meeting to establish whether the new boy/girlfriend was worth spending this sort of money on. You also see the tiffs, which tend to happen by the door just before someone stalks out. She was in a long Hawaian cotton halter neck. He was in hedge-fund off-duty blue shirt and blue jeans with (bad sign) hands thrust into back pockets to show the full aggressive chest. I don't know what had gone wrong, but it seemed to involve an eight-year-old who stood by unhappily thinking it was all his fault. He and she left separately. I hope they got something sorted out.

You will want to know what I ate. I had a ragout of turbot and Serrano ham with baby asparagus, and a fillet of black bream with samphire and mixed vegetables, and half a bottle of Malbec. It was all gorgeous, and served by a nice young student from Kent University who wanted to be a copywriter. This being one of the many jobs I failed at in my youth, I was able to give him lots of inaccurate advice. The restaurant is pretty nigh perfect – great to look at, good chairs and linen, good pictures and an interesting (if disturbing) people-watch. It enthused me for tomorrow's Land's End trip, which may be a bit hairy. And if a restaurant's job is not to give you courage for the morrow, what is it for?

It is now tomorrow - the first of July, Padstow to Fowey is 112 miles, and I have to be on my best behaviour because my crew is Ruby's designer, Nigel Irens.



We set off early as soon as they lower the lock gate – which looks all wrong, but seems to work.

Battering our way down the Camel against the tide, we weave our way between 30 racing Cornish Crabbers, who look at us in that slightly racist way that people reserve for members of the species who are like them, but NOT THE SAME . Just like the previous leg, the weather is not as forecast, and we can only make 210° rather than the 240 we need. The tide is now neap-ish so less helpful, but the passage plan stays pretty accurate despite wind and tide, and we manage our rendezvous with a pilot friend of mine who is going to take aerial pictures of us sailing. The results are very pleasing, apart from the lazy warp dangling from one side of the boat!



Despite this distraction, we manage to keep up with my guesswork on the chart, and turn left at Pendeen Point and pass the Longships lighthouse at twilight. At this point I switch on the masthead tricolour, and am confronted with a red light on the starboard side, and a green light on the port, both facing backwards. I wouldn't have minded if this was an accidental 50/50 chance mistake, but I spent ages with the mast on the ground making sure that the replacement light (keen readers will remember that its predecessor fell off somewhere off Dorset) was fitted the right way round.

Instead of using "There's some red port left in the bottle" I had obviously used "We've got some port, right?" Anyway, we switched the whole sorry mess off and relied on the tiny steaming light on the top of the mizzen – and, as before, we saw hardly any other shipping so it didn't matter that we were less than perfectly visible.

Having been properly fearful about Land's End (the chart says "Heavy seas during gales") it was a relief to pass Longships, albeit unlit, with the engine chugging reliably along, in calm seas. By way of comment, Nigel said "They didn't think much to the ocean – the waves they was fiddlin' and small," so I added "There was no wrecks and nobody drowned – fact nothing to laff at at all." We both then, in unison and in the dark, started "There's a famous seaside palce called Blackpool," and kept going until I dropped out halfway – I never learnt the second half. But Nigel carried on unerringly, and by the time we passed the Runnel Stone he had got to "What – spend all my life raising children to feed ruddy lions? Not me!" Both of us had had Stanley Holloway's record of Albert and the Lion (written by Marriott Edgar) when we were small boys. In my defence, I think because I'm older I had it on a two-sided 78, so only learnt side one and was too lazy to wind up the gramophone for side two. The last time I recited the bit I do know was, strangely, in Ethiopia in 1994, outside the lion enclosure at Haile Selassie's palace!

We did two hours on, two hours off during the night, and passed the Lizard, as predicted, at 0130 on Tuesday morning. Nigel claims to have seen a school of baby porpoises on one of his watches, but this was almost certainly a hallucination.

The unhelpful wind, remarkably, had followed us all day and all night as we rounded the corner – I don't think we adjusted the sheets for six hours or so. But now suddenly it is on the starboard beam, and for the first time since leaving Bristol we are able to sail properly. We do high 4s, mostly 5s, and the dawn breaks as we pass the entrance to the Fal. The original plan had been to go into Helford

and pick up Tim Rice, but he is entangled with his new musical and not allowed out. So we settle for Fowey, and Peter Skellern – not as prolific, but still a fine song-writer and my stage partner for twenty happy years.

The next day, Peter and I take Ruby home to Salcombe. Yet again the forecast was SW 4/5 or 6, and yet again the wind was nothing of the kind – westerly 2 was nearer the mark, so we in a gentler version of the first day of the voyage, with the wind dead behind where Ruby doesn't like it. We motor-sailed, as we have unashamedly for much of the trip, because we must reach the entrance to Salcombe harbour by 1600 if we are to get up the creeek and on to the mooring.

I was going to do this last leg on my own. Jack and Joe had absolutely vetoed this, and threatened to stow away to prevent their foolhardy Dad from attempting it. So I chose the best possible compromise, which was to have Peter as crew. Apart from playing the piano together, we have often sailed side by side, and he is a much better helmsman than me. So I scamper about pulling ropes and making bacon sandwiches, and he steers – which also suits his increasing tendency to arthritis, which I am so far blessedly free from.



Absolutely nothing happens on the trip. I see a fin, but not a whole dolphin. So, as we pass Plymouth, motor-sailing contentedly with the GPS telling us where we are and when we'll get home, we discuss what we always discuss – the same thing Jules and I discussed coming down the Bristol Avon. How on earth? HOW ON EARTH did the Vikings, Columbus, Cabot, the Armada, Cook and Shackleton do what we're doing? With heavy, sagging sails, no engine and no decent clock before John Harrison invented it, how did they get anywhere? We get out the tea-towel with Nelson's battle stations at

Trafalgar on it. We come to the same conclusion we always come to – that the achievements of square-rigged, pre-technology sailors are simply beyond the comprehension of the modern mariner, and beyond admiration.

We do meet one other boat, and don't hit it. Surprisingly, we have to alter course, even though the ocean only contains us and him. I take a picture, and wish he had taken one of us, because we all have too many pictures *from* our boats, but not *of* our boats. Could someone please start a flickr site where yachtsmen can post pictures like this one for the owners to download?



Could be Beken of Cowes, that.

The photo problem is happily solved, though, at the end of journey; as we approach Salcombe I ring Jules to see whether he is around and can take pictures of us coming into harbour. He answers. He is not only around, but on the same stretch of sea as us, on the way back from Plymouth in his Westerly Fulmar. We can see him half a mile to port, and he can see us half a mile to starboard. So, just as we round Bolt Head, and the wind gets up to speed Ruby home like a horse taking its inexperienced rider back to the stable, he catches us up and snaps away. Happy coincidence, to end a journey blessed by good luck.



We breeze across Tennyson's bar, and through the beautiful, welcoming haven that is Salcombe, our unbeatable home port, and I have time to tidy the sails and build the dinghy before we turn into Waterhead Creek and tie up to our weedy buoy. My darling Annabel is standing on shore with a helium balloon, with 'welcome' on it. We are home in time for tea, and not just after mackerel fishing, or 'going for a sail' but after 827 miles of just-adventurous-enough adventure.



I have learnt a lot; you can plan the known knowns, but not the unknowns – you can be sure of tides and marina bookings and B&B reservations, and you can carry a spare everything; but you cannot know the weather – and nor can the BBC, who seem often less accurate than passageweather.com. An utterly reliable engine, VHF and anchor are the best preventers of heart failure. At sea, healthy eating tends to be ignored. Thicker ropes are more comfortable to hold, and give peace of mind. Reef early. Or even slightly earlier. Travel with crew who have been there before. Do journeys the whole family can enjoy. Rely on others – they will always come up trumps if they know you have handed over power to them. Make sure your children and grandchildren know you better than you knew your own parents and grandparents.

Best of all, I found that while I was trying to make sure my family and friends got home safely, they were trying to do the same for me.

Every sailor should do this trip. Of course, you need a boat which can do all of these things:



While keeping safe all these:



I have got the sentimental impression over the last few weeks that Ruby has enjoyed doing that, just as I have enjoyed getting to know her better. She has been a joy, and we have avoided the fate of Zachary Stilgoe, who drowned in her namesake in 1702. Thank you to everybody who helped. I was seventy when I set out. I am now seventy and a quarter, and I feel much younger than when I started.

Richard Stilgoe, 16th July 2013.

I once sailed my boats to Devizes
Its masts were of two different sizes
The one that was small
Was no use at all –
But the other was huge, and won prizes.